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Agenda item 131
Pattern of conferences

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Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/62/161 and Corr.1). The Committee also had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2007.[1] During its consideration of the reports, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarifications.

2. The report of the Secretary-General, which was issued on 27 July 2007, was under preparation at the time the Advisory Committee was considering the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009. Consequently, many of the issues highlighted in the report of the Secretary-General were also the subject of discussion during the Committee's deliberations on the estimates under section 2, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council affairs and conference management, of the proposed programme budget. In its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009, the Advisory Committee has commented on matters relating to conference servicing, including integrated global management of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, information technology initiatives, workload and costing of services, succession planning, documentation services, and publishing and meeting services.[2] The present report should therefore be read in conjunction with the Committee's first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009.

3. The Advisory Committee notes that, as part of the effort towards integrated global management of the Department, a compendium of administrative policies, practices and procedures was adopted in 2006 reflecting agreements reached by the four duty stations. The aim of the exercise was to streamline procedures, share resources and thus achieve economies. The Committee understands that the

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Sixty-second Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/62/32).
[2] Ibid., *Supplement No. 7* (A/62/7), chap. II.A, sect. 2.

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compendium would be kept under review and updated or broadened as appropriate. In this connection, as indicated in paragraph 8 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/62/161), the 2007 Coordination Meeting of Conference Managers discussed a number of areas for further coordination. The Committee notes in particular that in 2007 the discussions have included implementation of a common roster of outside contractors, as well as the approval of terms of reference of a working group on publishing to be composed of representatives from each of the four duty stations. **The Committee welcomes these initiatives, which it considers a step towards integrated global management, and commends the Department for the progress it has achieved in this area thus far**.

4. In its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009, the Committee commented in detail on information technology initiatives of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.[3] In this connection, the Committee was informed that the Department intends to evaluate the capabilities of enterprise content management (ECM) and customer relationship management (CRM) applications as global solutions for documents and meetings management, respectively. However, progress has been slowed by delays in the approval and procurement processes for these applications. Both are being introduced by the Information Technology Services Division for use in the Secretariat. Upon request, the Committee was provided with updated information. With regard to the acquisition of ECM, three processes were under way concurrently: (a) contract terms were under review by the Office of Legal Affairs; (b) the Information Technology Services Division was in the process of developing a proof-of-concept model; and (c) the Procurement Division was finalizing the terms of the bid. It is anticipated that these three processes would be completed by the end of October 2007. The Advisory Committee was informed that the procurement process for CRM had been completed and that contracts had been concluded. The Department has scheduled its first workshop with CRM consultants in October 2007 to begin the evaluation process.

5. The Secretary-General reports a slight decline in utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities for all duty stations except Nairobi. The overall utilization factor for 2006, at 83 per cent, was 2 per cent lower than in 2005, but above the established benchmark of 80 per cent (see A/62/161, para. 24). The Advisory Committee notes that the methodology employed for calculating the utilization factor has not changed significantly since 1993. The Committee has commented, in the past, that raw statistics on the utilization of conference resources are potentially misleading and could obscure the understanding of actual efficiency gains in the utilization of allocated conference resources (see A/60/433, para. 2, and A/59/418, para. 5). The Committee remains convinced of the need to improve the methodology by including qualitative analysis and, inter alia, measurement of results achieved with available resources. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the Department had sought the assistance of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in addressing the need for a better picture of utilization of conference services. **The Committee recommends that the results of those consultations be included in the next report on the pattern of conferences**.

[3] Ibid., chap. II, paras. I.37-I.42.

6. The Advisory Committee discussed with representatives of the Secretary-General the Department's plans for minimizing the disruption to conference services that may be caused by the implementation of the capital master plan. The Department intends to move the entire document processing chain, as an integrated operation, to swing space by the end of the third quarter of 2008. Should delays in implementation of the capital master plan occur, the move would be postponed to the first quarter of 2009, after the conclusion of the main part of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly, in order to avoid undue disruption of documents processing during that period. The Committee notes that the fifth annual progress report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the capital master plan envisages some adjustments to the schedule which, depending on the action thereon by the General Assembly, may have an impact on the Department's plans.

7. The Department has taken measures to address the problem of late submission of documentation, including, among other things, providing authors with a model timeline for the preparation of reports, sending weekly reminders to focal points in author departments to apprise them of upcoming deadlines, seeking feedback from intergovernmental bodies through document service reports, providing slotting schedules to presiding officers of intergovernmental bodies for reference in preparing their programmes of work and advance management of page limit waivers with heads of author departments. **In connection with the latter, the Committee welcomes the fact that through proactive measures, the Department has managed to negotiate a total decrease of 59,196 words, or 112 single-spaced pages, from the level originally requested by author departments for the second half of 2007 (see A/62/161, para. 67).**

8. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General, compliance with the submission schedule and page limits is, in some cases, beyond the control of the Secretariat. This is true, for example, for submissions from Member States and reports of the Secretary-General that are compilations of inputs from Member States. As noted in paragraph 69 of the report, some author departments send out questionnaires for such reports that make no mention of the need for brevity, and the departments are reluctant to summarize submissions of Member States, as recommended by the General Assembly in section D, paragraph 5, of resolution 41/177. The Department reports that it continues to draw the attention of the secretariats servicing intergovernmental bodies to the drafting guidelines for reports not originating in the Secretariat (A/58/CRP.7).

9. In paragraph 77 of the report, the Secretary-General seeks endorsement by the General Assembly of the guidelines mentioned in paragraph 8 above and sets out a number of measures intended to address documentation problems. In brief, it is suggested that the Assembly may also wish to urge intergovernmental bodies to respond to document service reports; affirm that documents prepared on the basis of submissions from Governments or agencies and programmes of the United Nations system should not reproduce the full text of submissions; reiterate its request that the Secretary-General bring to the attention of intergovernmental bodies, at the time of adoption of decisions, any request for documentation that exceeds the ability of the Secretariat to produce such material within its approved resources and to give due explanations; and request Member States and intergovernmental bodies to submit their inputs to reports of the Secretary-General in a timely manner and make efforts to keep them succinct. **The Advisory Committee recommends approval of the measures set out in paragraph 77 of the Secretary-General's report.**

10. The Advisory Committee notes that the Department has established a publishing working group composed of focal points from the publishing areas of each of the four duty stations, with the aim of sharing information and best practices and investigating the possibilities for technology and capacity-sharing among the operations (see A/62/161, para. 83). The Committee understands that, as part of its work, the working group will conduct an assessment of the printing capacities throughout the Organization. **The Committee welcomes this initiative and urges the working group to expedite completion of the above-mentioned assessment.**

11. Paragraphs 84 to 86 of the report of the Secretary-General outline the measures that have been taken to develop indicators of achievement and measures of full-system performance to supplement the individual workload standards that have traditionally been applied in the Department. The proposed performance measurement matrix, which includes indicators for financial performance, timeliness and meetings management, as well as quality, productivity and human resources measures, is set out in paragraph 86 of the report. The Committee also discussed with representatives of the Secretary-General the efforts made by the Department to quantify conference servicing costs. The Committee was informed that the current costing model provided a fairly clear picture of the costs of services. However, the Department felt that further development of costing techniques for the Department, in isolation from the rest of the system, would not prove fruitful. Upon enquiry, the Department indicated its willingness to participate in a pilot project for the collection of cost information as part of a broader exercise. The Advisory Committee will address cost accounting separately in the context of its report on that matter.

12. The Advisory Committee notes, as it did in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009,[4] that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management will be particularly affected by retirements in the coming years, with a total of 238 staff, or more than 20 per cent of all staff on established language posts, due to retire between 2007 and 2011. The need for adequate succession planning is therefore acute. The Secretary-General highlights outreach efforts being made to universities and training institutions, as well as training initiatives undertaken by the Department to address this problem. It is clear, however, that the ability of the Department, in cooperation with the Office of Human Resources Management, to hold an adequate number of competitive examinations for language posts will be essential for effective succession planning.

13. While the number of competitive examinations needed to fill foreseen vacancies due to retirement is not quantified in the report of the Secretary-General, the Committee was informed, in the context of its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009, that a total of 28 competitive examinations would need to be held in the next five years to ensure that an adequate pool of prospective new recruits would be available when needed. As noted in paragraph 95 of the report of the Secretary-General, strategic scheduling of the examinations is important, as the rosters tend to go stale if offers of employment are not forthcoming soon after their establishment. The Committee notes that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has reservations concerning the intention of the Office of Human Resources Management to seek economies of scale by scheduling all examinations for the same language at the

[4] Ibid., paras. I.46-I.48.

same time. **The Committee urges the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Office of Human Resources Management to agree on measures aimed at ensuring the prompt organization and scheduling of the necessary language examinations in the coming biennium.**

14. **The Advisory Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to submit proposals for handling succession planning in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, and assigning responsibility in this regard, in the context of his next reports on the pattern of conferences and human resources management.**